

how sweet it is (to be loved by you) by thenewromantics

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Gen, el & the whole party bonding, every party member gets their time to shine here, plus a healthy dose of el & hop and el & joyce for the soul, the longest fic ever written about ice cream sandwiches probably, very fluffy and very soft!!!

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Lucas Sinclair, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper

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Summary:

el learns a lot of things in the summer of eighty five, like making an ice cream sandwich and how lucky she is to have the friends she has.

aka four ways el learns to make an ice cream sandwich + one way she teaches someone.

how sweet it is (to be loved by you)

Author's Note:

this was written for the stories from summer fic challenge series being hosted by freshxbloom over on tumblr!! the prompt for this particular fic was 'making ice cream sandwiches' and i wrote 12.5k words about. the longest fic ever written about ice cream sandwiches? yes probably.

anyways, there's plenty of fluff and good times to be had, so enjoy!!

i. warm, soft and gooey

“It’s so hot, I’m dying.”

Dustin’s loud and sudden groan reverberated loudly around the otherwise still and silent cabin. From her position on the couch, El’s eyes widened. She knew that he was no doubt exaggerating - *hyperbole* had been her word of the day just a couple of weeks ago - but the sincerity in his voice startled her.

It was just the two of them at the cabin that day. Hopper was at work, while every other member of the party was busy with other commitments. (Mike had been particularly annoyed earlier that day when he had called her to inform her that he had been forced into babysitting Holly that day and taking her to her swim lessons). El didn’t mind though. She loved Dustin and felt like she hardly spent any time with just him these days.

“I’m sorry.” El said softly, unsure of what her response should be.

Usually when El made dramatic remarks such as Dustin's, Hopper's response was something along the lines of "*suck it up, kid.*" But she doubted she could say something like that to Dustin.

Dustin popped up from his place on the floor next to her, his hair mused and puffy from the humidity. His face was pinched together, in confusion she realized after a moment, and she heard him hum slightly to himself.

"What are you apologizing for?" El shrugged, not sure she could think of any kind of explanation. Besides, she still wasn't the best at words and the last thing she wanted to do was cause even more confusion.

"You're right though. Hot." El said simply, fanning herself dramatically. Dustin's face softened, a smile breaking out across his lips as he let out a deep laugh. El grinned.

"Oh!" Dustin suddenly exclaimed, getting to his feet and nearly knocking the living room table over in the process. "I have an idea!"

Without giving any further explanation, Dustin darted into the kitchen area. The cabin wasn't that big, so El could still see him entirely from her place on the couch, but that hardly meant she could figure out what he was doing. She watched him with confused intrigue as he pulled flour, eggs and sugar from the fridge and cabinets and threw them onto the counter.

"What are you doing?" She finally asked, getting up and going to stand next to him. Dustin smiled at her, that look on his face that she

knew all too well as his *'I have an idea'* face, excitement bubbled in El's stomach.

"El. Wonderful, wonderful, El." El giggled. "Have you ever had the pleasure of eating an ice cream sandwich?"

El's eyebrows crinkled together. Ice cream...sandwich? El had had ice cream plenty of times (Hopper had a bit of a sweet tooth that only ice cream seemed to be able to quell). And sandwiches were one of the few things that El was able to make by herself, completely from scratch (Hopper had been *extremely* adamant that El learn how to make at least a peanut butter and jelly sandwich so that if for some reason, she needed to feed herself, she could). But the idea of mixing things like mayonnaise and peanut butter with ice cream didn't sound very good.

Dustin must have seen her confusion because he quickly started to explain. "An ice cream sandwich is when you take two cookies, chocolate chip is definitively the best kind to use, don't let anyone tell you any different. Then, you put a scoop of ice cream in between those two beautiful chocolate chip cookies, and BAM!" El flinched. "Ice cream sandwich."

She could practically see his mouth watering as he described this so called ice cream sandwich and while Dustin would eat pretty much anything so his judgement wasn't always trustworthy, what he was describing did sound good. El enjoyed both cookies and ice cream, so she didn't see why she wouldn't like a combination of the two of them.

Wordlessly, El moved around Dustin and opened the freezer. Typically Hopper didn't allow her to go digging around in there

herself, afraid that she would eat eggos straight from the box, but she knew where he kept his ice cream. Pulling out here, she presented it victoriously to Dustin who grinned.

“Perfect.”

Dustin snatched the container from her hands, admiring it. “Is Hopper gonna be mad that we’re using this?” Dustin asks, but by the way he’s already opening it and sticking his finger in, she doubts he cares too much about what the answer to that question is.

She shrugs. “Probably, but he lets me get away with a lot.”

That wasn’t *totally* true, El still wasn’t allowed to just go anywhere whenever she wanted, hence why her friends typically came to the cabin, but Hopper had learned which battles were worth fighting with her. This meant that he probably wouldn’t even bother trying to argue with her about eating his ice cream.

“Alright then.” Dustin clapped his hands together and El felt her body begin to buzz with excitement. “Let’s get to work.”

Turns out that “work” meant making the cookies. El had made cookies before, Joyce always asked El for help if she was making them while El was there, but Dustin seemed to have a very specific way to make them. He also swore up and down that homemade chocolate chip cookies were the *only* cookies that were acceptable in an ice cream sandwich.

“Because, when you make them from scratch, once they’re out of the oven you can immediately fill them with ice cream. This makes them warm and gooey and it practically melts in your mouth and it’s pretty much the best thing ever. After nougat, and nilla wafers.”

Luckily, somehow, they have all the ingredients to make said chocolate chip cookies in the cabin. At first El doesn’t know why there’s a bag of chocolate chips hidden in the back of the food cupboard, but Dustin is excitedly taking them from her hands before she can question it too much.

“Now, the secret to the perfect chocolate chip cookie is the amount of chocolate chips.” El is peering over Dustin’s shoulder as he holds the chocolate chip bag over the bowl of batter. They had spent the last 15 or so minutes mixing all the necessary ingredients together, with Dustin taking the lead, claiming that he knew exactly what he was doing.

“What happens if you put in too many?”

Dustin snorted. “El, there is no such thing as too many chocolate chips.” He punctuated his point by dumping half of the bag into the batter, some scattering on the, now disastrous looking, countertop.

Despite the mess, and the overflowing with chocolate chips bowl of batter, Dustin looked pleased with their creation. Clapping his hands together, he turned to El.

“Now, we need to make them into cookies and bake them.”

There happened to be one singular baking sheet in the cabin, which El was pretty sure belonged to Mrs. Wheeler and was brought over by Mike months ago when he wanted to teach El how make homemade pizza. El knew from experience with Joyce that you were supposed to cover the baking sheet with *something* to make sure the cookies didn't stick, but before she could remind Dustin of this fact, he had already scooped about 4 cookies worth of batter onto the sheet.

"The key to perfect ice cream sandwiches is having huge cookies to work with." Dustin informed her. "Here, you make some."

Stepping aside, Dustin let her have the reigns. El smiled at him, scooping out what seemed to be the right amount of batter before stopping with Dustin made a noise that sounded like Hopper did when she tried to keep information from.

"What?"

"El, who are we making these chocolate chip cookies for, ants?" El squinted her eyes slightly. She didn't get it. "Nevermind, just, you can put way more batter into a cookie."

She continued to add batter to her scoop before Dustin made a hum of approval. It seemed like way too much, but he was the expert in this situation, so she didn't question it.

After a couple of more minutes, they had a full tray of cookies ready to go into the oven. They both were covered in batter and flour, but had satisfied smile on their faces all the same. It was going to take them a while to clean up and based on what time it was, Hopper

probably would be home before they got around to it, but El was hardly going to complain.

They had had fun, and that was all that mattered.

“So, in twenty minutes we will be in ice cream, chocolate chip heaven. Are you ready?” Dustin asked, rubbing his hands together. His eyes were bright and full of delight and it made El smile.

“I think so.”

Dustin didn't look satisfied. “C'mon El! Get excited! You're about to experience quite possibly the greatest thing you've ever experienced in your entire life!” El laughed, both in slight disbelief and at Dustin's excitement. “You know, thinking about it I'm kind of appalled that when Mike made that list of things that you had to try this summer ice cream sandwiches weren't on the list, when they're by far the most important thing.”

El blushes slightly when she thinks back to said list. When Hopper had sat El down, with Mike in attendance, because “*Wheeler, I only feel like giving the speech once so you might as well be there*” and told her that even though she technically was still supposed to be keeping a low profile, he wasn't going to make her hideout all summer. Mike had, predictably, been thrilled, and immediately started complying a list of exciting things for them to do this summer.

Thinking back at some of the things on said list - swimming, picnics and catching fireflies being some of the ones that sounded most exciting - she doubts that ice cream sandwiches can be *that* good. But, she has an open mind.

Dustin and El spend the next twenty or so minutes passing the batter bowl between them. El might not have ever made Dustin's version of chocolate chip cookies, but she does know that no matter the kind of cookie, or the baker, eating the left over batter is the best part.

Time seems to fly because before El knows it, the oven is dinging and Dustin immediately jumps into action. She watches with wide eyes as he reaches for the ice cream and opens it before approaching the oven.

"Alright El, this is where things get serious, are you following me?" El's eyes are still wide, but she nods. "Good, so your job is going to be scooping the ice cream. I will be handling the cookies. When I say go, you're going to scoop ice cream onto three of the cookies and then I will construct them into cookie form."

Before she can say anything in response, Dustin is putting a large spoon in her hand, followed by the ice cream carton. Because it was sitting out on the counter the entire time they were making cookies, and the subsequent baking time, it's melted down. Dustin doesn't seem to mind though, and neither does El. As far as she's concerned, ice cream is ice cream, no matter how melty.

"Oh these are good, El." Dustin says as he pulls the tray from the oven. She has no idea where he brandished an oven mitt from, considering she didn't even know they had one in the cabin, but considering the amount of heat she can rising from the tray, she's glad he had the mind to put it on. "Absolute perfection, I'd say."

Once the tray is safely on the counter, El approaches her spoon ready.

Dustin takes his time to flip the six, rather large, cookies and El's mouth begins to water. Dustin was right, they do look good.

"Ready?" Dustin asks, looking at her, a grin on his face. El returns it.

"Ready." With a clap of his hands, El is off. Her scoops are large and based on the whooping coming from her baking companion, they're Dustin approved. He follows behind her, pressing the cookies together to form the sandwiches.

Once the three ice cream sandwiches are assembled, Dustin and El step back to admire their work. It's now that El realizes just how messy the kitchen is, but it's also right about now that she realizes she doesn't care.

"El, since you have never experienced the sheer joy that comes with taking a bite of an ice cream sandwich, you may do the honors." El laughs.

"Thank you."

"Of course, of course. Besides, I am just excited that I get to be here to witness it. Mike is gonna be so upset he missed this." El, who had already moved to grab one of their treats from the tray, sends Dustin a playful glare, which he laughs at.

"So, I just...take a bite?" The ice cream sandwich is warm and the ice cream is already dripping on her skin and running down her arm as

she holds it in front of her.

“El, I want you to take the biggest bite of that thing that you’ve ever taken of anything in your entire life.” El nods. “I wish I had a camera.”

So, El takes the biggest bite she’s ever taken of anything in her life.

And immediately she’s greeted by the sweetest taste she’s ever tasted. The ice cream and cookie instantly melt in her mouth and she easily swallows. It’s soft and gooey and makes her feel warm inside, despite the coldness of the ice cream.

“So...what do you think?” Dustin’s smile is so big, El was pretty sure she’d never seen him happier.

El considers it for a second. Sure, she’s pretty sure the cookie isn’t cooked all the way through, and the ice cream is dripping all over the floor and is covered her shirt, but the chocolate is sweet on her tongue and her whole body is pleasantly warm.

She tries to mimic the size of his smile with her own, but she doubts she could ever be as happy as he is in this moment. She certainly tries though.

“I love it.”

The victorious whooping that Dustin lets out makes El laugh and even though an hour later, her and Dustin are forced to scrub the kitchen clean by an unhappy Hopper, El would call the day a success.

ii. starts cold but lasts forever

As the summer ticks on, the temperatures only seem to get worse. By the middle of July, the heat is unbearable, so much so, that even after the sun has dipped below the horizon, it's still blistering outside.

That doesn't stop El and Max on this particular evening though.

The two girls are laying side by side on the grass outside of Max's house, alternating between looking at the stars and braiding each other's hair - El's finally being long enough - all the while, talking, *gossiping* as Max calls it, about the boys.

It's the first time that El has ever been over to Max's house. Despite his allowance to let her leave the cabin every so often, Hopper has a pretty short list of places that El is allowed to be without his supervision. But, this time he's made an exception. Billy, who was probably halfway to California at this point, hadn't been heard from in days and Max's mom and step dad were out of town for the weekend, leaving Max to her own devices.

Her own devices meaning she would be staying with Steve.

However, on this particular night, Steve was working evening shift

down at the station with Hopper, hence El being allowed over to keep Max company until Steve was able to come and get Max, and subsequently also give El a ride back to the cabin where Hopper would be waiting for her.

“God, it’s disgusting out here.” Max sighs, dramatically throwing herself back on the grass. The braid that El had just done in her long red hair, unfurled and lay unceremoniously across the ground.

El hummed in agreement. She assumed that by disgusting, which at this point El strictly associated with the taste of mushy peas, Max was referring to the heat outside, considering how sticky and uncomfortable it was outside.

“We should eat something cold.” El responded, looking down at her friend. Max’s face morphed slightly, the frown that had been stretched across her face curling into a smile. Rolling over onto her side, Max pushed herself up on her elbow. Grass was trapped in her hair, but Max hardly seemed to pay any mind.

“Ellie.” El grinned. She liked Max’s nickname for her. It made her feel special. “You’re an absolute genius.”

“Thank you.” El says with a laugh.

“No seriously, I could kiss you.” Max exclaims jumping up from the grass and onto her feet. El’s eyebrows crinkled together, unsure what to make of Max’s comment, but luckily she keeps talking, not giving El a chance to think about it too much. “I won’t, but I could, because you’re a genius.”

She held her hand out then, allowing El to join her standing. Max seemed to be thinking about something and El watched her friend with curiosity.

“I think we might have ice cream in the freezer. I’m pretty sure it’s just boring vanilla but honestly, I’d eat demodog flavored ice cream at this point.” El blanched, sticking her tongue out and Max laughed, bright and full.

In that moment, El is very glad she decided to be friends with Max all those months right after the Snowball.

“We should make ice cream sandwiches.” El suggests, the memory of the warm and sweet treat she’d shared with Dustin just a week earlier still fresh in her mind.

If possible, Max’s smile grows even wider. She loops her arms through El’s and begins leading them to her front door.

“So you have superpowers *and* you’re a genius.” Max dramatically sighs, throwing her hair over her shoulders. “No wonder all of them love you so much.”

El knows who ‘them’ refers to, *their boys* as El and Max had affectionately started calling them. She smiles.

They walk slowly and silently up the front stairs of Max's house, El taking care of the door with a small slick of her chin. Max lets out a breathy laugh.

"I don't think I'll ever get over how cool that is."

Being inside offers little relief from the outside heat. In fact, it's almost worse. The air is thick, stale and still, and even as El lifts each of the windows slowly with her powers, nothing seems to fix it. Both girls groan, gazes finding each other.

When they reach the kitchen, Max's hair is frizzing at the ends and El can feel hers stuck to the back of her neck. Max goes to stand in the middle of the room, while El hovers in the doorway, watching her. The redhead frowns.

"We don't have any cookies." Max notes, her frown forming into a pout.

"We could make them." El suggests, smiling slightly. She's slightly confused as to why they weren't going to be making them to begin with. Isn't that what Dustin said was the best, and only, way to do it?

"Oh no." Max shakes her head definitively. "Homemade cookies are way too thin and flimsy for ice cream sandwiches. We need the heavy duty ones for this."

El thinks back to the cookies she made with Dustin, and maybe Max

was right. They had been quite thin, and one bite had the whole cookie falling apart in her hand. El hardly had time to form a response to Max's question before Max was on the move again, her face now set in a determined look.

"I know what we can do." The phone was in Max's hand before El could blink and if she hadn't known any better she would have thought *she* had been the one moved it. Max quickly dialed, smiling when the person on the other end picked up.

El watched curiously from the doorway as Max spoke.

"Steve." El could see Max roll her eyes at whatever Steve's response was. "Yes, it's Max. Do you have a lot of fourteen year old girls calling you down there at the station." Max smirked and El couldn't help but giggle.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Max dismissively waved away Steve's words. El couldn't hear exactly what he was saying, but she could tell he was annoyed. "Can you go and buy us some cookies and bring them to my house?"

El can hear a muffled, "*Max, I'm working. I can't just leave to be your little servant boy all over town*" from the other end of line and Max snorts.

"Please, just let Chief-o know that the cookies are for me and *El* and he'll probably give you the money to pay for them." As much as El wants to argue with Max about using her just so they can have cookies, she also *really* wants an ice cream sandwich.

Her sweet tooth wins this round.

El doesn't hear what Steve says but based on the way Max quickly says, "Thanks, Steve. You're the best!" and hangs up the phone, she can deduce that either Steve agreed to it, or Max hung up while he was still arguing.

Whichever it was, fifteen minutes later there's a knock on the front door. Max and El are sitting in the living room, Max trying to balance an ice cube on her nose while El uses her powers to hold one against the back of her neck. The sound makes them both jump, Max's ice cube falling to the ground and beginning to melt against the hardwood.

On the other side of door is a very sweaty, very annoyed looking Steve Harrington.

He's dressed in the typical Hawkins Police Uniform, the pant legs rolled up slightly to expose his ankles. Aviator sunglasses are sitting atop his hair, which seems to have nearly doubled in size due to the heat and he has a very unpleasant look on his face. However, he also happens to be swinging a plastic bag with his fingertips, which causes Max's face to light up.

"Thanks Steve!" She exclaims, snatching the bag from him. El also smiles in thanks. Steve softens a little bit at her smile, but holds his resolve, especially when Max attempts to close the door.

“Oh whoa, not to so fast there, Red.” Steve says, holding the door open with his palm. From her place just beyond the doorway, El can see Max’s lips furl into a snarl, but she knows it’s all for show and Max secretly loves the nickname from Steve. “This is the last time anything like this happens alright. I have work that I should be doing. The only reason the chief let me leave is because of that one right there.”

Steve points at El as he talks and she waves. “Hi Steve.”

“Hi Ellie-belly.” El grins widely at the nickname and Max takes this opportunity to begin closing the door.

“Alright Steve, El and I got it. We won’t call you again, promise.” Max is pushing the door as she speaks, so by the time she’s done, the only the beginning of Steve’s words can be heard through the door before he’s cut off.

“I find that very hard to believe.” He says, his voice slightly muffled by the door. They hear him sigh. “Fine. But if you call me again, I won’t be coming. You have two hours before my shift is over and you better behave yourselves.”

Max rolls her eyes and El clamps her hand over his mouth to stifle her laughter. “Yes, Steve. We promise we’ll behave ourselves.” Max parrots. Even though El can hear Steve groan loudly through the door, he descends the stairs and a couple moments later they hear the noise of his car starting.

“Well, now that we have the cookies, we can finally make these ice

cream sandwiches.” Max’s eyes are gleaming and El can already feel her mouth beginning to water.

They retreat back to the kitchen and El retrieves the ice cream from the freezer while Max lays the cookies out on the table. Unlike the cookies her and Dustin made, these ones are uniform in size and at least double the thickness.

“Now, it looks like we have enough ice cream to make a couple of these bad boys.” Max claps her hands together. “Alright El, why don’t you grab a spoon out of the drop drawer over there and I’ll get our cookies ready.”

El does as instructed and brandishes a large spoon, grabbing a smaller one too, just in case. When she turns back around, Max has laid out 4 cookies on a plate with 4 cookies laid out neatly next to it.

“We’re not making them warmer?” El asks, slightly confused. One of the key parts of the ice cream sandwiches her and Dustin had made was the warm, gooeyness of the cookies. In fact Dustin had sworn up and down that the warm, gooeyness of the cookies was *crucial* in correct ice cream sandwich construction.

Max makes a face. “Why? So they can melt the ice cream make it so we only have like three seconds to shove the whole thing in our mouths before we’re wearing more ice cream than we’re eating? No thanks.” El frowns. Max glances briefly at her expression before shrugging. “At least, that’s how I see it. Who told you that the cookies should be warm?”

“Dustin.”

Max snorts. “Makes sense.” With a small sigh, Max turns and leans her hip against the counter. “There’s nothing wrong with ice cream sandwiches with warm cookies, but trust me, I think you’re gonna like this way much better.”

At this point, El’s still kind of new to whole ice cream sandwich concept to begin with, so she’ll try anything. She smiles. “Okay.”

This makes Max grin and she turns back to the plate of cookies. “So what we’re gonna do is put the ice cream in, sandwich it up and then put them in the freezer.”

“The freezer?” El’s eyebrows crinkle together in confusion.

“Yep. Frozen is the best way to eat these things.” El can only eye the cookies with wonder, absentmindedly nodding as Max scoops ice cream onto them. Without thinking El floats the four remaining cookies into the air, hovering them in front of Max’s eyes. Max throws El a smirk, which El returns as she carefully places the cookies to complete the sandwiches.

“How long should they go in the freezer for?” El asks once the plate is securely resting between a bag of frozen peas and a package of pork chops.

“Not that long. We still have like an hour and half until Steve will be here, so we’ll have plenty of time to enjoy them.”

And true to her word, fifteen minutes later Max is pulling the sandwiches from the freezer and El has to admit, they look *delicious*. El can practically feel how cold they are just looking at them and it makes her mouth water.

When Max hands her one, El is pleased to see that it doesn't melt. In fact, when she moves to take a bite, the cookie, and the ice cream, are both rock solid.

"See, the best part about eating them frozen is that they last like, forever. It takes so long for them to melt, that you're pretty much already done eating it before you have to worry about being covered in ice cream."

El does have to admit that that sounds pretty desirable, because as much as she loved the ones she ate with Dustin, being sticky after the fact because of ice cream running all down her arm, wasn't that much fun.

It almost breaks her teeth, trying to get a bite, but when she does, she sighs happily. The ice cream still melts pleasantly in her mouth and the chocolate chips are still sweet on her tongue.

"It's good right?" Max says, a small smirk on her face. El realizes then that Max had been watching her reaction, much like Dustin had. El nods.

"So good."

Max victoriously lifts her fist, cheering around her ice cream sandwich and El giggles. She takes another bite, still amazed that the ice cream is staying firmly between the two cookies and none has begun to drip onto her arms.

In the end, Max is right, the ice cream sandwiches last them forever. They're just finishing them off when Steve pulls into the driveway and honks twice. El can't remember the last time her and Max had this much fun and when Steve pulls up in front of the cabin and El turns to wish her friend goodbye, Max gives her a smile, ice cream still visible on her lips, El's heart threatens to burst with happiness.

She wouldn't trade it for the world.

iii. lots of work and time required but the most rewarding

According to the small thermometer in the corner of the cabin it was nearly ninety degrees out and El was bored.

Hopper was at work, which meant that she was alone and to be completely honest, she was pretty sure she was going to die. Either of the heat or absolute, soul crushing boredom - she had finally gotten the hang of hyperboles - and while she couldn't fix the heat in the small cabin, she could solve her boredom problem.

Pushing herself off her bedroom floor, where she had been desperate to try and avoid the heat, she makes her way through the cabin, stopping with a smile on her face when she reaches the phone.

Running her finger down the small piece of paper that has a list of the phone number of basically everyone El knows, she nods when she finds who she's looking for.

Whispering the number to herself as she dials, she feels nerves settle into her stomach when she hears the phone ringing. She's never called here before and she's suddenly nervous that someone else will answer, not the person she's trying to reach.

"Hello?" She relaxes, the tension releasing from her shoulders and a wide grin spreading across her face.

"Lucas!" Lucas laughs softly on the other end. "It's El."

"Hey El! How's it going?"

El sighs, shrugging. It takes her a moment to remember that she's on the phone and Lucas can't see her. Despite Hopper getting a phone line installed at the cabin earlier that month, El's still only made a couple phone calls (most of them to Mike) and she hasn't quite got the hang of it.

"I'm bored." She declares. Lucas snorts on the other line. "I was actually wondering if you wanted to come over."

"Really? You want me to come over?" Lucas sounds shocked and El frowns.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

“You’ve just never invited me over just me before, that’s all.” El’s frown deepens. Lucas is right though, usually when he comes over, he’s with at least one of the other guys, or Max. She wants to change that right now.

“Well now I am.”

“Okay, cool. I’ll be there soon. Do you want me to bring anything?”

El considers this for a second. Then she gets an idea. She might not be able to make it magically get colder outside, but she thinks she might have something they can do that will cool them down.

“Lucas, have you ever made ice cream sandwiches?”

Thirty minutes later, a knock on the door has El popping up from her seat the kitchen table and darting to answer it. She has a wide smile on her face as she flings it open, all of Hopper’s cautions about answering the door far from her mind. Luckily, exactly the person she was expecting is on the other side.

“Hey El!” Lucas exclaims, a smile on his face as she wordlessly moves aside to let him in. He’s dressed for the weather in a tank top and shorts, but sweat is still splattered across his forehead and a quick

look outside confirms that he did indeed bike all the way over here.

“Hi Lucas. I’m glad you’re here.” She says grinning. “Did you bring the stuff?”

Lucas nods, removing his backpack from his shoulder. Guiding him to the table, El takes the bag from his hands and dumps the contents on the table, her eyes widening when she gets a good look at it all. She recognizes all the ingredients for cookies but there are also an array of ingredients she doesn’t understand, like what do they need *heavy cream* for? She doesn’t even know what heavy cream is.

He must recognize her confusion because after a minute or so Lucas lets out a small ‘oh!’ before clearing his throat.

“Whenever my mom and I make ice cream sandwiches together we always make our own ice cream, and trust me I’ve had both Dustin and Max’s versions of ice cream sandwiches and this is hands down the best way to make them.” El nods, showing her understanding, but in reality her head is spinning.

She had no idea there were so many ways to make ice cream sandwiches.

“It takes a while, the ice cream will actually take a couple hours to freeze, but trust me, it’ll be totally worth it. I swear.”

It’s not that El doesn’t believe him, she’s just overwhelmed and a

little confused but she believes Lucas and if he says that this is the best way to do it, then she supposes she should give it a try.

“Okay, let’s get started then.” They share a smile and El knows it’s about to be a good day.

Luckily, Hopper is working until pretty late into the evening, so her and Lucas can spread out as much as they want and not have to worry about bothering anyone. This turns out to be a blessing as it turns out making ice cream is way harder than El could have imagined. Not to mention, it takes *forever*. There’s just so many steps and Lucas basically told her that if they mess up one little thing, the whole batch will be bad and they’ll have to start over.

No pressure or anything.

El feels the tension release from her shoulders when they finally finish mixing all the ingredients. It had been a quiet affair, both of them too afraid to take a misstep, as Lucas only really brought enough ingredients for one batch. But she feels herself letting out a nervous, relieved laugh when Lucas is placing the batch in the freezer, setting the kitchen timer so they’ll know when to go in and stir it.

“That was hard.” She remarks, taking a seat in her usual seat at the kitchen table. Lucas laughs, sitting across from her and crossing his arms on the table.

“Trust me, you’re gonna be so happy that you did it though when you finally taste it.” El pouts, but nods. At this point she just hopes it’s

cold. Folding her arms on the table, El puts her head down, the dark circle of her arms providing little reprieve from the heat.

There are multiple beats of comfortable silence between them. El can hear the tell tale sound of fingers drumming on the table and it makes her grin. The sound is familiar, as Mike is constantly tapping his fingers against the wood, but still different as Lucas's drumming is rhythmic and soothing, while Mike's is chaotic and anxious.

"Has anyone ever told you how much you and Mike are alike?" She asks, propping her chin on her arms. Her question surprises him, based on the way he flinches slightly, his shoulders jumping.

A flash of confusion crosses his face before he shrugs. "No, not in so many words but I guess people have said we do things similarly, why?"

El shrugs, the motion awkward with her arms still folding on the table. "You were just drumming your fingers on the table. Mike does that too."

Lucas rolls his eyes slightly. "A lot of people do that, El." The comment isn't unkind by any means, but El's opinion doesn't waver.

"I know." She unfolds her arms in order to playfully shove his shoulder across the table. "But that's not the only thing you have in common." A look of intrigue falls upon Lucas's face. "Do you remember when we all met?"

There's a deep breath before Lucas nods. They all hardly ever talk about that week in November two years ago. Not wanting to upset Will, who still gets nightmares, or alienate Max, who wishes she could have been there to try and help. But neither of them are here, so El pushes on.

"You didn't like me."

"El, that's not -"

"It's okay, Lucas." She cuts him off lightly, smiling. "I understand."

"Sorry."

She shakes her head, he never needs to apologize for how he treated her that week, because she gets it. "You didn't like me because you wanted to focus on finding Will. I can't be mad at you for that."

"No offense El, but what does this have to do with me and Mike?" Lucas looks nervous, which confuses her. She makes sure to choose her next words carefully.

"It was how much you care about Will that made you not like me and be," she hesitates for a second, trying to remember the word that Hopper had taught her that would fit here, "weary of me. That makes you like Mike."

She's trying hard to make him understand what she's trying to say, but he still looks confused. "How does me being weary of you make me like Mike?"

"You cared about Will, you wanted to find him." She says, and he nods. "Mike cares about his friends. You both care."

A look of realization crosses his face and he smiles. "Thanks El." She sees him gulp. "That means a lot."

Someone's hand reaches across the table, El isn't really sure if it's hers or his, but it doesn't matter. Their hands squeeze each other in a reassuring, affectionate gesture. El's chest warms, and despite the heat outside, it doesn't bother her, in fact she welcomes it.

The calm and comfortable silence doesn't last long, as the timer dings only seconds later. El giggles when she sees Lucas jump in his chair, a noise escaping his throat. He playfully glares at her across the table and she can only smirk.

"I'll take care of it." Lucas says, looking embarrassed. El is still giggling to herself, but she too stands from the table to follow him. Even though he offered to do it, she still wants to watch so she can see how it's done.

The ice cream doesn't even look close to being done and according to Lucas they still have a couple of hours before it's ready for them to eat. El stifles a groan, she had no idea making everything from scratch would be so hard.

“If you want we can make the cookies now.” Lucas suggest when he spots El’s face. “We’re gonna want the cookies to be cooled down by the time we make the sandwiches, so it might be better if we make them while we wait.”

“Cold?” El asked, before shaking her head. “I mean, the cookies will be cold, like frozen?” She remembered how the frozen cookies had tasted a couple weeks ago with Max, the way it had fallen apart in her mouth and lasted for hours. Lucas shook his head though.

“Nah. I see the appeal in them being frozen, but honestly it just makes it harder to eat. Like why would you want to break your teeth while trying to enjoy something.” El considered this for a moment, head spinning. According to Dustin, the best way was warm and gooey, Max said frozen and solid now Lucas was saying just have them be cooled off.

“Okay.” She said slowly. “This way will make it easier?”

“It should, yeah.” Lucas said with a small shrug. “They’ll be hard enough that they’ll absorb the ice cream and stop it from melting too much but they also won’t hurt to eat.”

El nods, trying her hardest to understand. One thing she had slowly been learning is that, despite what she had learned in the lab, which was that everything had to be done one way or it was absolutely wrong and a failure, everyone had different ways of doing things. And she supposed that that logic extended to ice cream sandwich making.

“That sounds perfect.” She finally said with a small smile.

And eventually, when she finally gets to taste it hours later, it is.

It seems to take forever for the moment to get there, but Lucas her and fill the time with light conversation and laughter. Maybe, just maybe, they also have a small food fight with the chocolate chips that starts when El chucks some at his head with a simple lift of her chin.

The day is fun and full of laughter and when the ice cream is frozen and ready to eat and the cookies are cooled down, her mouth is watering. Lucas grins widely as he hands her the first of the three sandwiches on the plate, seeming to anticipate her reaction.

He’s leaning against the counter, eyes trained on her face and despite the intensity of his glance, she’s grinning as she takes a bite. *God*, it’s everything she could have asked for it to be in more. Lucas must see the the overwhelming joy overtake her features as she swallows because she sees him pump his fist.

“Yes!” He exclaims, holding his hand out for a high five. She laughs, pressing her palm against his. “I knew that you would like it.”

“I love it.” El corrects, taking another bite, a small noise of enjoyment escaping. “It’s one of the best things I’ve ever eaten.”

“Oh man, Dustin and Max are going to be so jealous when they hear this.” El doesn’t know *why* Dustin and Max would be jealous, considering their ice cream sandwiches had also been some of the best things she’s ever eaten.

But, *goodness*, El doesn’t think she’s ever tasted anything so good before. The ice cream melts on her tongue and just sweet enough and the cookie has just the right amount of crumble to it. It’s delicious and she’s glad she’s able to share this moment with Lucas.

“Thank you, Lucas. For teaching me.” She says, smiling. Lucas returns her grin, his smile almost reaching his ears.

“Anytime, weirdo.” He says affectionately, reaching across the counter to shove her shoulder lightly. Warmth pools in her stomach at the once insult that’s become an endearing nickname.

Warmth that stays lodged in her stomach as she watches from the front door as Lucas bikes away a little while later. Warmth that stays until Hopper gets home after dark, and presses a gruff kiss to the top of her head when he notices the third ice cream sandwich sitting in the freezer, a note reading ‘for Hop’ in El’s curly penmanship.

Yeah, all that hard work definitely paid off.

iv. unique and beyond the understanding of others, but still amazing

El quickly learns that she loves going over the Byers house.

Not only does she absolutely adore spending time with Joyce, Will and even Jonathan, who treats with the same care and kindness that he does his own brother, but she also just loves the atmosphere of the home, the feeling of family that surrounds her whenever she's there.

She also loves how *cool* it is.

For some reason that El will never understand, the minute she steps into the Byers house, no matter how scorching hot it is outside, it instantly feels at least ten degrees cooler. Mike once explained something to her about wind and air flow, but he had used a lot of words that she didn't really understand, but she didn't really care that much. All she cared about was the absolute relief she felt when she crossed the threshold.

So, needless to say that when Hopper dropped her off on the morning of what would become the hottest day of the summer thus far, El was thrilled. Not only would she get to spend the day with one of her favorite people, Will, but she would get to spend it in a comfortable environment.

"Alright, kid. I'll be back to get you this afternoon after my shift gets out." Hopper says gruffly as El's hand hovers over the door of the car. She sends him a look, and he can only roll his eyes at her. "Don't look at me like that."

"Sorry." El mutters, moving to push the door open, but Hopper stops her.

“Hey now, listen kid.” She looks at him and he gives her a small smile. “I want you and Will to stay out of trouble, alright. Don’t go giving Joyce a hard time.”

El playfully raises her eyebrows. “I promise.”

Hopper snorts, causing her to grin. “Thatta girl.” Reaching out, he attempts to ruffle her hair, but she dodges him. “Have fun.”

It’s at that moment that Will appears in the doorway of the Byers house, waving at El enthusiastically. She waves back, giving Hopper a wide smile as she jumps from the car.

“Bye dad!” She casually calls over her shoulder, quickly bolting away from the car and up the front steps of the Byers house. She looks back just in time to see Hopper grinning widely, sending her one last wave.

Her and Will watch as Hopper backs out of the driveway and begins his drive to the station before Will grabs her attention. A soft hand hooks around her elbow and she smiles at him.

“Let’s get inside, it’s unbearable out here.” El can only nod in agreement, following Will into the house. The cool air hits her immediately and she lets out a happy sigh, closing her eyes. She can hear soft laughter coming from Will next to her and she opens one eye to playfully glare at him.

“Was that El at the door?” Will and El break eye contact, El’s face breaking out into a large smile when she spots Joyce. “Hi sweetheart.” Joyce says softly when she spots El.

El crosses the living room in a few strides, accepting the hug that Joyce is offering. “It’s good to see you, sweetheart. Hopper wasn’t giving you too much of a hard time, was he?” El laughs into Joyce’s hair, shaking her head as she steps back.

“Just as much as he usually does.” El says, shrugging her shoulders. Joyce gives a small laugh, a moony eyed grin on her face. El and Will share a small look.

“So, what are you kids up to today?” Joyce asks, crossing her arms. El shrugs. “Well, just let me know if you end up going outside, I have some things I need to do around the house so I wanna make sure I know where you kids are, okay?”

El can see the look in Joyce’s eye, the worry that El is pretty sure will always be present, no matter how many months pass. It’s the same look that Hopper gets when he tells her to call him if she ends up being somewhere that isn’t where he’s dropping her off. It’s the worry that her, or Will, will vanish into thin air once again.

Sneaking a peak at Will out of the corner of her eye, El catches a flash of something across his face before he smiles. “Yeah mom, of course.”

“Too hot to go outside.” El adds, causing Joyce to laugh softly. El doesn’t really know why it’s funny, it is *way* too hot to go outside,

and she'd much rather stay in the cool interior of the Byers house, but she grins regardless, happy to put a smile on Joyce's face.

"Well, you kids have fun, alright? Just let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks, mom." Will says, coming up to stand next to El and grab her hand. "C'mon, I wanna show you something."

El smiles, nodding at Will and throwing Joyce a small wave as Will leads her down the hallway to his bedroom. He enters first, leaving El to click the door shut behind her with a flick of her hand.

"What did you want to show me?" She asks, watching Will as he moves around his bed. He doesn't say anything though, only gestures for her to follow him. With her eyebrows crinkled together, she comes up next to him, her lips curling into a wide smile when her eyes find what he wanted to show her.

"Do you like it?" Will asks, smiling. For some reason, El feels tears prickling the corners of her eyes.

On the desk is a drawing. That's not an out of the ordinary thing for Will to have proudly displayed somewhere in his room, but this is the first time one has nearly brought her to tears. Usually Will's drawings are fantastical drawings of the party's DnD characters, or extravagant landscapes that depict far off, mythical places.

But this one is nothing of the sort.

This one is of her.

The likeness is uncanny (although really, if you asked El, she would say that Will made her out to be far more beautiful than she ever thought herself to be), and El can tell that every stroke of the pencil had been made with careful consideration and admiration.

“I love it.” She finally whispers after a couple of minutes of silence. “But why me?” Will shrugged.

“I don’t really know.” He trailed off for a second and El watched him. “I guess, well...you know how Jonathan takes a lot of pictures?” El nodded, fondly thinking about the very first photo he had ever gifted her, a framed photo of her and Mike from the Snowball, which sat on the top of her dresser, “I guess he does it because he never wants to forget anything, so he can remember the good stuff. I don’t really take good pictures, but I wanted to be able to remember stuff too. So I draw them.”

“You want to remember me?” El says, slightly amazed. Will grins.

“Yeah, I do.” El’s heart bursts. She reaches down and gives Will’s hand a light squeeze. The pale mid morning sun shining through the window and illuminating the entire room in a soft glow. Something vibrates between them, something that makes El smile, it’s understanding she things. An understanding of what the other one has been through, and an understanding of how special it is that they’re both here, right now, in this moment in time.

El breaks the silence first, taking a small step away from Will and moving so she can sit on his bed, her legs folded underneath her. He follows her with her eyes, a small smile still on his face.

“I get it you know.” She says. Will’s face transforms into one of confusion and he moves to sit next to her.

“What do you mean?”

“With you mom. I understand.” Luckily, Will seems to gather what exactly it is that she understands, because he doesn’t ask her to elaborate. In fact, he nods, looking down at the floor briefly before meeting her glance again.

“Lemme guess, Hopper?” El lets out a small, breathy noise that sounds like a cross between a laugh and a scoff. She nods, however, causing Will to chuckle.

“Hopper.” She confirms, breathing in deeply. “Mike, too, sometimes.”

“Really?”

El nods, but there’s a small smile on her face. “Yeah. He calls me every night, even if we had just seen each other, and I think part of it is to make sure that I’m still here.” She looks forward to Mike’s phone calls every night, and usually they spend what seems like hours, but she doesn’t miss the way his voice hitches when he exclaims ‘El!’ when she picks up the phone, almost as if he was afraid she wasn’t

going to be there.

Will smiles, softly. “He does that because he loves you.”

Her heart picks up speed in her chest, but she rolls on, not wanting to show her embarrassment at his use of *that* word. “And your mom loves you, that’s why she does it.”

“I know she does.” Will says, an easy smile falling onto his face. They both look wistfully at the closed door to his bedroom, and in the brief beat of silence between them they can hear Joyce puttering around out in the kitchen.

“I wish I had your mom.” El whispers, immediately turning red. She had definitely *not* meant to say that out loud. She’s about to power through an explanation, desperate to explain to Will that she’s not trying to steal his mom, but Will only lays his hand on top of hers.

“Trust me, sometimes I think my mom also wishes she was your mom.” El raises her eyebrows. “I’m serious, she always worries about you. Everytime I come home after spending time with the party she asks me about you.”

That causes El to blush and she finds herself playing with the fraying strings of her shorts, embarrassed. But then, she laughs.

“I think Hopper also wishes she was my mom.” Will’s eyebrows crinkle together before he also bursts into laughter, the sound

reverberating against the walls.

“Maybe someday.” Will says once the laughter has died down. There’s a small grin on his face and his eyes are twinkling as he looks at her and El knows he’s thinking the same thing as her.

“Yeah, someday.”

It’s then that El gets an idea. Based on a look at the clock on Will’s wall, it’s still morning, but she doesn’t think that’s important. Television has taught her that it’s when important, heartfelt conversations are happening that you should be eating ice cream.

“Hey, Will?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to make ice cream sandwiches?” Will smiles, nodding.

“Actually, I have a better idea.”

With that, Will is pulling her up from the bed and they both excitedly clamor around his bed and out the door into the hallway. The opening of the door surprises Joyce, who jumps when she hears it, her hand over her heart.

“Jeez, kiddo, don’t scare me like that.” She says, although there’s a smile on her face. “What’s going on?”

“Can El and I have some ice cream?” Will asks, giving his mom a smile. Joyce frowns, looking at the clock behind her before eyeing her son.

“Will, it’s barely eleven in the morning, why do you want ice cream?”

“Because, it’s summer. We promise it won’t ruin our appetite, please?” Will lightly nudges El with his elbow, which El wouldn’t be surprised if Joyce didn’t notice. El grins.

“Yeah, we promise.”

Joyce’s resolve fades, her shoulders slumping and she gestures her hands at them in defeat. She looks playfully annoyed, tickling the back and Will’s neck as he pulls El into the kitchen behind him.

Once they’re in the kitchen, Will moves to the freezer, grabbing the ice cream and setting it onto the counter. El seems to understand what he’s going to ask her before he can open his mouth and she pulls two bowls down from the cupboard, a smile on her face.

“What are we making that’s better than an ice cream sandwich?” El asks, leaning her elbows against the counter, watching with wide eyes as Will scoops ice cream into both of the bowls.

“We’re basically making an ice cream sandwich, only it’s going to be way easier to eat.” Will says. He moves around her to go to what El assumes is the cookie jar, which is resting on the other side of the counter, but El tips her chin, sliding it down so it rests in front of them.

“That’s what you wanted, right?” She asks, nervous for a second when Will doesn’t react. His eyes are slightly wide, but then he smiles slightly.

“Yeah, I just sometimes forget that you can do really cool stuff like that.” El smirks. “Honestly, this isn’t really that exciting, I just always think ice cream sandwiches are really hard to eat.” He says with a shrug, pulling a couple cookies from the jar. “I mean, they’re good, but I always end up getting ice cream all over me.”

El wants to say something, ask him if he’s ever had one of Max’s, where the ice cream is frozen and stays firm between the cookies, or one of Lucas’s, where the cookies are so moist and good that they absorb all the ice cream that threatens to drip down your arms as you eat it. But, she’s distracted by Will’s next movements.

Breaking up the cookies, he starts sprinkling them into the bowls. El peers over his shoulder, watching as the chocolate chips dissolve slightly against the ice cream. Her stomach growls, and Will laughs softly.

It doesn’t take long until he’s done and handing her a bowl.

She takes a bite, the ice cream and cookie combination melting against her tongue. She can feel her lips curling into a smile and she immediately digs back in for another bite. Will is smiling next to her.

“I had a feeling you would like it.”

And she does. In fact she loves it.

Her and Will spend the next hour slowly eating their cookie and ice cream concoction, El enjoying every single last bite, even when it's turned soupy. They laugh and talk of the last DnD campaign and excitedly converse about the party's plans to go swimming at the quarry the following week. The sweetness of the ice cream perfectly matching the laughter between them.

Sure, it might not be an ice cream sandwich, but it still hits the spot just right.

v. a little bit of everything, but most importantly, love

If there's any place that gets even hotter than the cabin as the summer drags on, it's the Wheeler's basement.

However, that hardly stops El from spending every other day there. The Wheeler basement has Mike, the cabin doesn't have that.

This particular day, it seems to be worse than it usually is. Mike and

El are tucked away in the corner, as far away from the windows as they can get. Their legs are tucked underneath them against the cool concrete, desperate for any semblance of relief from the heat that they can get.

Honestly, it's days like these that are El's favorite. Despite the heat, there's nothing she loves more than just spending all day in the safety of the Wheeler basement, her first real home. Usually when her and Mike spend the days down here, they'll curl together in the blanket fort, but today it was just too hot.

So instead, they sit in the corner, under the stairs, in the dim light, the only noise the sound of the dice hitting the game board as they play Monopoly. They've been playing for hours it seems like, the rest of the house still and silent around them, making time move both in the blink of an eye and slow as can be.

"How are you so good at this?" Mike asks, speaking for the first time in hours, as he hands her another five hundred dollar Monopoly bill. She's been ahead pretty much since they started, at first El thought he was just letting her win, but now she thinks he might just be really bad at Monopoly.

"Beginners luck." She says with a shrug, a smirk tugging at her lips. It's not beginners luck though, because her and Mike have played this hundreds of times before, and he knows this, causing him to glare at her. He can't hold it though and after a second he smiles, shaking his head and looking back down at the game board.

She watches his shoulders tighten as he counts the money that's still sitting in front of him and suddenly she feels guilty. There's also beads of sweat gathering on the part of his neck that's exposed to her

and she herself can feel sheens of sweat coating the back of her legs. She decides that they need to get out of here.

“Mike, we don’t have to play anymore.” She says carefully, grabbing his hand and stopping him from moving his game piece. Mike looks at her, his face scrunched up, confused.

“We can keep playing, El. I don’t care that you’re beating me.” He says, shrugging his shoulders, continuing to move his game piece. El shakes her head, despite the fact that he’s not looking at her.

“That’s not why.” His eyes find hers again, this time more concerned than anything. She softens, smiling slightly. Her hand finds his again on the game board and instinctually his fingers intertwine with hers.

“Is everything okay? Is something wrong?” She has his full attention now, she knows and she shakes her head. Her heart soars though, at his overwhelming concern for her. It’s something she’s still getting used to, someone caring about her as much as he does.

“Too hot.” She says, her words coming out more like a whine than she had intended. Her other hand that’s not holding his comes up to fan herself. “Can we go upstairs?”

El knows for a fact that the upstairs of the Wheeler house is drastically cooler than the basement is. Mike told her that this is because they have AC upstairs, she doesn’t really know what AC is, but she likes it. The only reason they tend to spend time downstairs is because usually Mrs. Wheeler is home and will float in and out of the living room when Mike and El are there, asking small talk questions

and attempting to start conversations.

And she likes Mrs. Wheeler just fine, and *god* how she wants Mrs. Wheeler to like her too. She just never knows how to answer her questions. Besides, usually the heat isn't this unbearable.

But, today is the worst it's ever been, and luckily, they're the only ones here.

"Yeah, of course." Mike says quickly, jumping to his feet. He holds out a hand to her and she takes it, letting him help her to a standing position. "You should have said something earlier." Mike comments softly, his face etched with worry.

El shrugs, resisting the urge to press a kiss to his cheek now that their faces are so close, she settles for squeezing hand. That familiar jolt of electricity that she feels whenever their hands together courses through her.

Without another word, Mike leads them to the stairs, taking them two at a time, El following him like a trail after a comet. When they reach the landing, Mike turns around to look at her, his other hand, not holding hers, reaching forward to press against her forehead.

"Better?"

She smiles, leaning into his touch. He's being dramatic and worrying about her too much, as he always seems to, but like usual, she hardly

cares.

“Much.”

He smiles then, a full toothy grin that takes over his whole face. She watches his shoulders relax and his grip loosens on her hand, now merely holding her fingers in his own. From there, he tugs her softly towards him, moving so he's leaning against the wall next the basement door.

“What do you wanna do now?” He asks softly, using his hand to push some of her hair back. It's longer now, the ends close to brushing up against her shoulders, and the heat has caused her curls to become untamable. Hopper refers to it as her lion's mane, always messing it up at the breakfast table before he leaves for work. As much as the gesture makes her feel happy, she much prefers the way Mike runs his fingers through it.

“Doesn't matter to me.” She says lightly, shrugging her shoulders. In all honesty, she could just stand here and look at him all day and consider it a day well spent.

“It's so boring up here.” Mike groans, throwing his head back against the wall, the thud of muffled by his mop of hair. “We should have brought the game with us, then we could keep playing.”

“You mean, I could keep beating you?” She teases and he playfully rolls his eyes at her, sticking his tongue out. A laugh escapes her and she returns the gesture.

“You’re mean.” He pouts. “I regret letting you win.”

El scoffs. “I’m not mean and be honest, I was winning fair and square.” She huffs, removing her hand from his so she can cross her arms across her chest.

“Yeah, you were totally winning fair and square. I suck at Monopoly.” Mike admits after a second, reaching out and taking both of her hands in his. He smiles at her, and she melts. And not because of the heat. “You’re totally awesome.” He whispers, leaning forward and pressing a light kiss to her cheek.

Her stomach flutters and she practically dissolves into a puddle on the floor. He pulls her into his chest and she sighs.

From her position, his arms securely around her body, she catches a glance into the kitchen. An idea forms in her head and she smiles.

“We should make ice cream sandwiches.” She says against the fabric of his t-shirt, stepping back ever so slightly to look at him. His eyebrows draw together. “Have you ever made them before?”

Mike considers this, before shaking his head. “No, I don’t think so. I’ve had them before, but I don’t think I’ve ever made them.”

This excites her, and she can’t help the wide smile that breaks out

onto her face. Pulling away from him, she grabs his hand tugging him in the direction of the kitchen.

“That means I can teach you.” She says, excitement vibrating through her. This is a rarity for her, not just with Mike, but with anyone. She’s hardly ever the one who knows something someone else does, so the fact that she gets to teach someone else is both nerve wrecking and thrilling all at once.

Once they’re in the kitchen, El stops.

“What?” Mike asks. She can feel him stop behind her, his feet bumping against the back of hers in order to prevent the rest of his body from slamming into her.

El freezes for a second, closing her eyes. All the different things her friends have taught her swirling around in her head like a tornado. The information is coming to her in flashes, warm and soft with Dustin, cold and long lasting with Max, hours of hard work but a delicious outcome with Lucas and laughter and sweet cookie infused ice cream with Will. She doesn’t know what to do.

Mike seems to be able to sense her confusion, because he rests a hand on her lower back, his chin resting on her shoulder. “Everything okay?” He whispers.

El softens, turning slightly so she can look at him. She tries to smile, but she knows the confusion is still coming through. Mike frowns.

“I don’t know what to do.” She admits after a second, looking down at the floor. Her hands find the hem of her shirt, which used to be his, and begin anxiously twisting in the fabric. Mike removes his hand from her back to stop her motions.

“What do you mean?” His voice is soft and comforting and her stomach flips.

“It’s just...” She takes a deep breath. Her heart speeds up, a tell tale sign she’s getting overwhelmed and the last thing she wants to do is start crying because of her frustration. “Everyone’s been teaching me how to make ice cream sandwiches and they’ve all been teaching me different ways and all of them were good so now I don’t know which one to do.”

The words tumble out of her mouth and she can feel her voice wobbling. Now that she’s said it all, it sounds like a silly problem and if Mike were anyone else, she would be laughed at, but Mike’s not like that. Not by a long shot.

“Hey, it’s okay.” He whispers, his hand coming to cup the side of her face. “That seems like a lot of information to process, I would probably be really confused too.”

She shakes her head, but Mike only rubs his thumb against the apple of her cheek.

“Before you say that I’m just saying that, I’m not.” He insists, and she can’t help but let out a small snort. She hadn’t gotten there yet, but that had been a thought on her mind. A beat passes before he smirks,

looking down at her. "I have an idea."

"You do?"

"Yeah." He says, grinning. His thumb grazes her cheek again and he leans in, this time pressing a small kiss to her lips. She doesn't think this is what his idea was, but she's not going to complain if it is.

"What's that?" She says, rather dazedly once he pulls away, her cheeks feeling flush. She doesn't think she'll ever be used to him doing that.

"Well, even though all the ways you were taught were a little different, I'm sure they were all the same in some way, right?" Mike asks. El considers this, slowly nodding. Each one did involve chocolate chip cookies and vanilla ice cream, so she supposes that's similar enough.

Mike gives one sharp nod, continuing on. "Why don't we just figure out a way to combine all of the different ways that you learn. Sure, that's just adding a whole other way to make them, but that way we get to try a little bit of everyone's." He punctuates his idea with a small shrug and El smiles.

It sounds perfect. Just like him.

"Yeah." She whispers.

“Yeah?” Mike repeats, a wide smile on his face. “You like that idea?”

“I love it.”

So that’s what they do. Once El explains the different things she loved about each of the different ways, Mike gets to work figuring out the best way to put it together. Luckily, he determines that they have all the necessary ingredients to make both cookies and ice cream, which means they’ll be able to include all of El’s favorite parts.

“Alright, so.” Mike claps, they’re standing at the counter in his kitchen, everything they need spread out in front of them. “We’ll make two batches of cookies, one first that will get frozen and the other one later that will be nice and warm when our ice cream is done. We’ll also set some cookies from the first batch aside to be mixed in the ice cream.”

It amazes El how easily Mike was able to come up with a solution and figure out the best way to bring together everything that El’s learned from their friends. It’s always been one of the things she’s admired most about him, his ability to solve problems in the way that does best by everyone.

He must be able to see her staring because his eyes find hers. His cheeks blush, hiding his collection of freckles and she can’t help but grin.

“What?” He asks, looking equal parts confused and nervous under her gaze.

“Nothing, I just,” she pauses. She knows what she wants to say, and in the early afternoon sunlight of the Wheeler kitchen, it feels like the perfect time. “I love you.”

She can see the way Mike’s face morphs, from confusion to dazed to happy, a face splitting grin taking over his features. Her heart is threatening to beat out of her chest, thrumming against her ribcage.

“I uh,” He swallows, “I love you too.”

She smiles, their hands meet. They both squeeze, electricity jolting through her. She doesn’t quite know how long they stand there, just smiling at each other, but soon enough the oven beeps, causing them to jump apart.

“I guess the oven is preheated.” El comments and Mike chokes out a laugh, shaking his head.

“Then let’s get to work.”

And work they do. Turns out, her and Mike work very well together, not that El really that surprised. They move around each other in the kitchen with ease, always seeming to know what the other is going to do before they do it. Everything is going great, perfect even.

Until they're ready to put them together.

"So, uh, problem." Mike says, from his place in front of the freezer. El looks up from where she had been breaking apart the cookies, her eyebrows knitted in confusion. Mike is holding the container they had used to make the ice cream in in one hand, an apologetic smile on his face.

"What?"

He winces, taking a step forward and placing the container on the countertop. The ice cream, or what's supposed to be ice cream, definitely does *not* look the same as it did when her and Lucas made it. Instead of being creamy and smooth, it looks like a chunky mess covered in ice crystals. El groans, tears threatened to spill over.

"I knew that something bad would happen." She says, looking down at the ground, rocking back and forth on her heels.

"Hey, hey, everything is gonna be fine." Mike immediately says, his hands falling to her shoulders, squeezing them encouragingly. "I bet it still tastes fine, it's not like we put anything in it that we're not supposed to eat or anything like that. You never know until you try, right."

El looks up, finding his eyes, which are warm and gazing at her affectionately. She nods, reaching up and wiping the tears away from her eyes. Mike gives her shoulders another squeeze, only moving

away when the oven timer dings, indicating that their second batch of cookies is ready to come out.

It's time for the moment of truth.

Ultimately, the ice cream sandwiches kind of suck.

Turns out that using both a warm cookie and a freezing cold one doesn't do anything to prevent the ice cream from melting quickly, only makes the whole sandwich harder to eat. Also, while it's very true that everything in the ice cream they made is completely edible the end result is not that great and the chunks of cookies don't do anything to make the ice cream taste *any* better.

But, El doesn't think she has anything to complain.

Because, as Mike laughs, leaning over to kiss her nose, exclaiming that she had gotten ice cream on it, she realizes that these ice cream sandwiches are probably her favorite of all. Even as ice cream gets all over her shoes and the Wheeler kitchen floor and she breaks her teeth trying to eat a frozen cookie, she makes a very important realization.

These ones were made with love, and that's all that you really need to make a perfect ice cream sandwich.

Author's Note:

for the record: frozen ice cream sandwiches are the way to go

anyways, i've never written anything this long before
in one go and i'm quite proud of this. i hope you all
enjoyed! let me know what you think!! thanks pals!
<3